

# The place of students in central Melbourne: cash cows or community members?

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## Background on RMIT students

As one of the country's larger universities RMIT students have a significant impact on central Melbourne. Altogether RMIT has around 63,000 students studying programs from secondary school to doctoral level. This makes the student community of RMIT in terms of numbers equivalent to 4 large country towns. Not all of these students are studying in Melbourne: around 12,000 are studying offshore, including 2,000 at the RMIT campus in Vietnam. Around 40,000 students study on the Melbourne City campus, five and a half thousand on the Bundoora campus, two and half thousand on the Brunswick campus, about the same number off-campus in Australia and around 500 students in regional Victoria.

The student population is very diverse. About a quarter of our students are born overseas; in addition around 7% come from non-English speaking backgrounds. Just over a third of RMIT's students are international students with one in four students in Melbourne being an international student. (This reflects the pattern of the Australian Technology Network (ATN) universities which among them attract 20% of Australia's university students: one in four of those students is an international student). International students at RMIT come from many different countries in South East Asia, North East Asia, Southern and Central Asia, Europe, Africa, the Americas, the Middle East as well as Oceania. Most come from China, India, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand and Vietnam.

This diversity of backgrounds of students is reflected at other universities in Melbourne, so much so that Melbourne ranks high in the world as a city that is attractive to international students, coming third behind London and Boston on one scale that was reported last year.

## Why is it important for students to feel part of a community?

- For a university such as RMIT that seeks to provide its students and graduates with a global passport, we are keen that our students become citizens of the world practising their trades and professions in culturally rich environments whether in Australia or overseas. More and more people are travelling, working in different countries moving around the globe for work, education or leisure. We want our students to learn from and contribute to the many different societies and communities that they will move through in their working lives.
- Not only is RMIT focussed on the global passport for its students and staff it is also focussed on work relevant learning. The 'T' in RMIT has a special meaning in this regard: our students are expected to develop knowledge that can be applied in different settings and different workplaces and our research is applied to solving real world problems. This means of course that our students require opportunities for developing their capabilities as productive, responsible and creative members of work based communities and networks.
- Students belong to many different communities: some where they live, others where they pursue recreational, cultural and sporting activities, yet others where they study. Some of these communities overlap, others don't. But each one of them has the

capacity to contribute to the informal and lifelong learning expected of all of us who live in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

- Implicit in the notion of community is a feeling of connectedness to the real or virtual worlds that we inhabit. That sense of connectedness and belonging has been shown to be a significant factor in both attracting and retaining students in their courses of study. But more than this it is imperative that students are attracted to the places where they study so that they have opportunities to develop the friendships and social and communal support that is necessary to sustaining their unique talents and capacities as human beings.

### **How do we encourage students to feel part of a community?**

Student communities develop in different ways and for different reasons. Fundamental to the communities though are shared and common interests. Some communities are based on courses of study as students develop the support groups that underpin their success and engage in the group work that mirrors workplaces. Other communities are based on more formal associations such as student clubs, societies and activities that range from student publications to the Chocolate Lovers Club, from collectives to faith-based groups, and from sports clubs to arts clubs. Yet others communities are based on the friendships, connections and networks that develop in the ordinary everyday interactions among people.

### **What then underpins the development of communities?**

First and foremost are the spaces and places that encourage the gathering of people together. I'm amazed at the patterns of movement during the day on the State Library lawn. Clearly this is a popular meeting spot for people: it's accessible and it's obvious. It attracts all sorts of people. The drummer on the corner, the school groups, the business people, the suits and the young fashionistas gather to sit and pass the time of day together. By contrast the Alumni Lawn at RMIT on the site of the former Police Garage encourages different sorts of activities as the young (mainly) men gather there to play soccer when the grass is green and people sit in the sun reading or writing, thinking or dreaming often on their own but sometimes in small numbers. A further contrast is Lincoln Square along Swanston Street which seems to be not yet 'worn in' as a community space. In these spaces and places people need to feel comfortable about whatever it is that they doing. They also need to feel (and be) safe and secure.

### **As a community space what does the centre of Melbourne have to offer students?**

1. Site of informal learning for students engaged in community based projects. For example the Singapore Students Club has organised a blood donation drive as its contribution to the community, Golden Key Honour Society formed a team for Clean Up Australia, a group of students made paper cranes for Hiroshima Day at Federation Square and there is a great deal of networking through activities such as World Week where links between cultural and national groups in the community and at RMIT are reinforced and extended.
2. Site of formal learning as students engage in business- and industry- related projects in their courses. These connections among students, business and industry are fundamental to the directions of RMIT and part of the thread that has bound together the City and RMIT since 1887.

3. A vindication of students' choices to live, work and study in Melbourne. For some students this has meant moving to a country on the other side of the world, for others it has provided an opportunity to move from home and take yet another step into the adult world. These choices are tied up with students' senses of identity and how they see themselves. I'm reminded here of the reason a Singapore student gave me for coming to Melbourne to study rather than to Sydney: Melbourne is a city of culture and he wanted to experience the arts in a way that he felt he would not have been able to do in a city that to him was very similar to the place where he grew up.

The challenge for us in community building is to find a balance between the flexibility and safety of the places and spaces that encourage students to explore common interests with the respect and sensitivity that the richness of their diversity demands.